



## COMMENT

## Commentary set: science communication in changing political winds

**Commentary on**

Science communication in changing political winds

**Fabien Medvecky**  and **Annette Leßmöllmann** **Abstract**

In an age of populism, rising authoritarianism and far-right movements that often go hand-in-hand with questioning of scientific knowledge, science communication is challenged to respond. How to foster dialogue and inclusion oriented interaction with publics and stakeholders when powerful people and institutions deny science, or if interlocutors don't share the assumption that science yields valid knowledge? In this commentary set, researchers of science communication analyse the current challenges and suggest answers from different perspectives, trying to brush against the grain in order to explore inspiring ideas. Their suggestions, in a nutshell: (1) Good science communication without a fundamental change in the platform logics of social media platforms will not be possible, and science communicators should fight for a better digital ecosystem. (2) Science communication that is blind to political power play will not be strong enough for rising the voice of science in a power world. (3) Governments need to invest in a resilient and reliable way of communicating in risk and crisis situations, because otherwise science and science communication lose trust. (4) Science communication as a democratic practice could create opportunities for participation in decision processes in order to support and strengthen democracy. (5) Instead of persuading the denialists of science, science communication could adopt values connected with science and empower people to reach their goals with the help of scientific knowledge and practices. (6) Science communication might embrace the performative power of communication in order to persist in a post-truth world. The commentary set highlights crucial aspects of what we see as a communication challenge for dialogue and inclusion oriented science communication and it aims at opening up discussion and debate.

**Keywords**

History of public communication of science

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**Introduction to the commentary set.** We live in a time when the emotional and value-driven impact of public messages is often stronger than their truth value. Furthermore, these emotions and values tend to antagonise facts and evidence, even among political leaders of world powers. In political and societal spheres across the globe, acting and debating based on facts, science, or evidence is viewed as insignificant or is even opposed as “being woke.” Populist uses of AI technology, especially on social media platforms, amplify this trend. As researchers and educators in science communication, we consider this as a challenge to the way we conduct and approach science communication on a very fundamental level. Obviously, basic assumptions about how people interact on social media, especially — but not only — are changing: the relevance of communication based on institutionally-derived measures of truth as a coordinate seems to be dwindling, and the urge to impress, emotionalise and mobilise others is on the rise. The Trump administration, with access to one of the most vibrant and productive science systems in the world, demonstrates how government power can disregard both scientific and academic work and science communication. This, in turn, challenges freedom of expression and research.

All these observations and issues are deeply connected with the dialogue and engagement model of science communication and raise pertinent questions: how to pursue meaningful dialogue with stakeholders and publics, between institutions and citizens, and between scientists and politics in times where dialogue is complex, because the interlocutors are anti-scientific and powerful enough to silence you? How to pursue inclusive, engaging science communication if the interlocutors don’t share the assumption that inclusion, or diversity, are valuable goals? How do we engage on social media, if it may lead to public backlash, hate speech and abuse?

**What does this do to science communication, and how to respond?** We invited scholars from different backgrounds and perspectives to present their assessments of the current communicative challenges and to offer solutions for science communication theory and practice. Our commentators picked fundamental topics on the media level, concerning the digital communicative ecosystem we all use and where science communication takes place; on the level of political governance and systems, asking how democratic systems and practices could improve with science communication; and also concerning science communication as communicative acts with the fundamental question if the dialogue models in use now can cope with the challenges outlined above.

We begin the commentary set with an analysis of the communication ecosystem we all live in and use to communicate. This ecosystem, which once offered many interactive and global communities, has shifted in recent years toward increasingly unethical, authoritarian, denialist, and hate-driven interactions. As science communication strives to promote ethical and inclusive dialogue, it should be concerning to science communicators that the system they operate within runs counter to their core values. With Grant’s (“Communicating science in an age of bewilderment”) [2026], our commentary set also looks back in history to explore a fundamental question about our current digital communication ecosystem: Grant highlights that, like the printing press during the French Revolution, today’s communication technologies are deeply connected to the political moment. He argues that what we urgently need is a public good internet.

Then, we turn to the government and governance level: government-driven risk and crisis communication can go fundamentally wrong and thus damage trust in science

communication overall. The reason can be that science communication doesn't get the significance in governmental workflows and inter-institutional organisation that it deserves. Therefore, it should be of interest of science communicators to advocate for better governmental communication. Moreno-Castro ("Reshaping science communication in a critical period of disinformation and distrust") [2026] also considers the role and spread of misinformation in an increasingly partisan-politicised communication ecosystem, this time taking Spain as an example. She makes a case for reshaping and promoting official or governmental science communication.

Amidst a global shift away from democratic governance, science communication should address the question of whether and how it can strengthen democratic processes and practices. Neves, Fagundes & Massarani ("The politics of (mis)trust: reframing science communication in a polarised Brazil") [2026] reflect on recent history in Brazil and explore the challenges that arise when populist conservative agendas intersect with a global pandemic. They argue that we need to embrace communication as a core democratic practice.

The following commentaries address the communication level directly: do science communicators who apply interactive, dialogue-driven science communication start from fruitful basic assumptions when planning their communication formats, or might it be helpful to rethink them? One challenge to a basic assumption might be that content delivery is very important, but without performance, the content will not reach its audience. The second challenge is to avoid neglecting power plays in communication. The third challenge is to fight denialism with allegedly value-free science, which yields a simplistic scientific view and can even antagonize audiences.

Van Oudheusden & Willems' "Science communicators must embrace 'post-post truth.' Here's how" [2026] draws attention to the concept of "post-post truth", describing it as an era that operates beyond truth and challenges truth itself. They call on science communicators to fully encompass the "post-post truth" condition and develop strategies that give science a meaningful place in this world. Their proposal? To rethink science communication as performance beyond content delivery.

Leßmöllmann & Medvecký focus on communication as a (power) game, and drawing on game theory, argue for the field of science communication to recognise and respond to the strategies of those who thrive on conflict and competition ("Power, epistemic authority, and game theory") [2026]. They contend that basic assumptions in communication, i.e., the assumption of everyone playing by "the same rules", are fundamentally challenged in the current communication ecosystem, and that communicators might need to embrace more strategic engagement.

Toomey & Elliott ("Does science communication have its goals wrong? From persuading science skeptics to promoting science empowerment") [2026] share the view that political and ideological forces have spurred the number of science deniers and conspiracy theorists. In answering that challenge, science communication can fall prey to deficit model approaches by trying to persuade denialists with "neutral" scientific facts. Toomey & Elliott argue that science is not neutral, but reflects values. Hence, science communication can empower people to pursue their own values and aims by equipping them with skills, knowledge or experiences related to science — as a pathway to minimise the risk of falling prey to pseudo science.

These commentaries offer various perspectives and proposed solutions. They provide related and often complementary analyses. Likely, none are completely fitting, or at least, fit for purpose on their own. But all, it would seem, are needed; they help us avoid proceeding uncritically and without reflection into the future. We take this commentary set to serve as a starting point for discussion of the fundamental changes needed in the science communication field and ecosystem.

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## About the authors

Fabien Medvecky — with a background in philosophy and economics, Fabien's research explores the intersection of knowledge, society, and values in science communication. His research examines how ethics and justice shape public discussions, decision-making, and the communication of contentious science and technologies, particularly in environmental settings. He is also interested in how economic knowledge is made public and how this knowledge interacts with other expertise. Based at the Australian National Centre for the Public Awareness of Science, Fabien is an active member of the science communication community, currently serving as President of PCST.

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